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Mentors' and novices' perception of teachers' professional career start in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The paper tackles the question: how do Slovak and Czech mentors and novices perceive the early start of teachers' professional careers? Its aim is to present a clear overview of the current state of novices' induction into their teaching careers and its legislative aspects. Besides this, it presents the data and results of research that was carried out in 2012 in Slovakia and is currently being carried out in the Czech Republic. Respondents to the questionnaire were both novices and mentors, but to have a deeper insight into the issue semi-structured interviews with selected respondents were completed as well.

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Introduction

The question of mentors and novice teachers is a topic that is equally being dealt with in Slovakia and the Czech Republic but is not being solved in its entirety. It seems that in Slovakia they have more systemic solutions for the induction of novices into teaching. In 1996 they codified this issue into legislation (§4) when Decree N°42 concerning the Further Education of Teachers was passed. Currently Act N°317/2009 concerning Teachers and Special Employees is valid and as for novices, they are addressed in §28. In 2009 also the Decree N° 445/2009 about continuous education, credits and attestations of teachers and other school staff as well as Guideline N° 19/2009-R concerning a Adaptation Education Framework Programme were introduced. The official status of the mentoring of novices and introducing them into teaching practice is

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indisputable and a highly desirable tool. In the abovementioned act the position of a mentor is briefly stated; something is said about their function and role and manner of nomination. As for this career position, it is defined as follows: *a mentor or special employee is a person who performs specific activities together with teaching and who is responsible for the induction period of a novice teacher, which (s)he closely and systematically monitors.* This position may be entrusted to an independent teacher or a special employee with the first attestation (In Slovakia there is a system of exams for promotion of teachers which are called *Attestations*, the first one can be passed after 5 years of teaching practice.). While some specific activities and duties for this position are partially stated in the act, the way in which a mentor should be trained for this position is not stated. It is assumed that several years of teaching at school and the first attestation is sufficient preparation for this role. In the Czech Republic one of the attempts to systemically solve this issue was the issuing of Decree N°79 of the Ministry of Education of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic on 26 October 1977 concerning the Unified System of Further Education of Teachers and Other Teaching Staff at Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Schools. Mentoring of novices was dealt with in §3, which precisely stated that each novice had to have an assigned mentor. It also stated who was responsible for their nomination, what their responsibilities were, who observed and evaluated the first steps of a novice at school and how it should be done. This decree, however, had an obvious ideological subtext. Nevertheless, the systemic measures of the decree, which are currently absent at all levels of schooling in the Czech Republic, are beyond doubt. The help and support to novices is nowadays provided according to personal discretion and the decision of headmasters in different schools.

As for the supporting materials for novice teachers, in Slovakia the help for novices and their mentors is mostly provided by Methodology and Educational Centres (so called MPC – Metodicko-pedagogické centrum) in all regional cities (9) all over Slovakia. These centres publish special publications and display some current useful information on their web-pages. In the Czech Republic one can find *Advice for Novices* e.g. at the portal www.rvp.cz (see <http://rvp.cz/informace/rady-pro-zacinajici-ucitele>). There are also other possibilities which different universities offer, as for example, a methodology course for supervising teachers of English. This one-year course is for teachers of English who work or would like to work as supervising teachers of English for would-be-teachers during their teaching practice at schools. The course is accredited by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Physical Education as one of the LLL/CPD courses to deepen teachers' professional qualification. The course originated within the project DOVU (Další odborné vzdělávání učitelů – Further professional education of teachers) and was developed by the Faculty of Education, Palacky University in Olomouc. Other courses are offered by the National Institute for Further Education (NIDV - Národní institut pro další vzdělávání) both for novice teachers to help them with adaptation at the beginning of their teaching career and for school managers organising the induction period for novices to upgrade their training. Furthermore, mentoring is the subject of discussion and a solution within the development of quality standards for the teaching profession too. As supportive material it is also possible to use the book *První kroky učitele* (First Steps of a Teacher) written by Podlahová (2004).

In Slovakia as well as in the Czech Republic the research connected with the subject – primary and lower secondary school teachers and their problems during the first year(s) at school – was carried out, for example, by Černotová (2010), Majerová (2011), Šimoník (1994) and Prokešová (2000), who together with their teams carried out quite wide research in this field. Their research was based on the assumption that the complicated entry into teaching at primary and lower secondary schools for the majority of graduates from teacher training programmes was caused among other things by the fact that they are confronted with three relatively autonomous but long-established concepts. These are teacher training institutions' visions of real teaching practice, ideas and expectations of a specific school and the individual expectations of a novice teacher, and his/her idea of successful practice of the profession. The answers of respondents have shown that the least frequent source of subjectively perceived failures is a lack of expertise or mismanagement of basic teaching skills. However, they are taken by surprise by the fact that there are high demands on educational and social competences. They feel "unprepared for the reality" of "such intense and constant contact with children", "contempt of parents for opinions, views and advice of teachers", etc. In addition, novice teachers according to this survey very much prefer experiencing empathic contact with colleagues and a sense of their acceptance by

colleague-teachers. The same study also shows that induction into teaching would be welcomed by 71% of newly qualified teachers who have had two years of experience at schools and 77.5% of teacher training programme graduates who are just about to start their teaching career. According to respondents the most important criterion for mentors prior to the professional aspects was their human qualities such as willingness to cooperate, empathy etc. (Prokešová, 2000).

Anyway, many experts, who from different points of view express their thoughts and findings about specific features resulting from the modification of the social and professional status of a teacher during his/her teaching career (e.g. Kolláriková, 1993; Kasáčová, 2002), as well as those who describe the analysis and classification of professional competences of teachers, their acquisition and development of teaching skills (e.g. Spilková, 1994; Vašutová, 2001; Belz & Siegrist, 2001; Švec & Trna, 1999; Švec et al., 2002; Švec, 2005; Blaško, 2009) have mutually agreed that the area of respecting the needs of teachers is still little explored and even less taken into account when content of continuous education is designed and education is conducted.

Our research is one of those that is specifically focused on the needs of novice teachers, and namely in the context of previous academic training and perceptions of those needs by mentors. At the same time, it is expected that its results will have an impact on course provision and adding relevant content of continuous education courses respecting the recently identified needs of novices and mentors.

Methodology

Since 2012, a Slovak team of lecturers at the Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra has been implementing project VEGA 1/0677/12 (Key Competencies of Mentors Necessary for the Efficient Mentoring of Newly Qualified Teachers), the goal of which is the most satisfactory and most comprehensive answer to many questions about mentors' needs and on their basis to identify the key competencies necessary for successful mentoring of novice teachers.

In 2012 in connection with this project a questionnaire survey was carried out, in which 132 novice teachers and 127 mentors from different types of primary and secondary schools from all over Slovakia took part. Two-thirds of mentors were teachers with more than ten years of teaching experience, and almost half of them had been mentors for at least six years. The majority of the mentors (93 - 75%) were officially appointed to this role and except for two, all of the mentors (98.43%) had never participated in any education aimed at the professional performance of this position.

At the same time semi-structured interviews were conducted in both groups of respondents. The number of these interviews was 23 with novices and 25 with mentors. At the beginning of 2013 cooperation with a researcher from the Czech Republic (Faculty of Education, South Bohemian University in Ceske Budejovice) was established, who carried out the research during the spring of 2013 using the same methods, the same questionnaire and interview scenarios and the research will continue in the following months (the researcher has managed to get the answers from 19 novices and 4 mentors). Due to the low number of completed questionnaires from mentors in the Czech Republic, the results in the text are not compared and only the most interesting facts are presented (as stated by novices, they had rather found their mentors by themselves; mentors were not officially appointed to them).

Results

In Slovakia as well as in the Czech Republic (CR) the majority of participants in all groups of respondents were women (total of 233:49), equally representing different levels of school education. Most of the addressed novice teachers in both countries have chosen their profession intentionally (51.66% said: "for sure yes" and 33.77% - "somewhat agree") and in most cases the respondents wanted to remain in educational system (89.18%). In 75% of cases mentors were officially appointed (most of them were told what their obligations in the role of mentors were). Approximately the same number of them stated that they wanted to become mentors and they wanted to do that job in the future. However, 98% of them did not participate in any kind of education

related to their position. The impact of novices on their professional development, a chance to learn something from them, admits 95% of mentors.

Regarding reflection of how novices were prepared for practice by their higher education training institutions, the results observed in the Czech Republic and Slovakia diverge. Slovak respondents evaluate their preparation and expertise in the subjects they teach mainly as "excellent" (39.39%) and "very good" (36.36%). In the Czech Republic most of the respondents marked this area as "very good" (9) and "average" (6). The same regards also the preparation in methodology of teaching the subjects – novices from Slovakia rated it better (as "very good" - 43.94% and "excellent" - 13.64%) than novices from the Czech Republic - the most frequent response in this area was "average" (10) and "weak" (4).

As for the level of teaching practice during their higher education training both the Slovak and Czech respondents evaluated it as "average" (40.91% of Slovak respondents and 10 Czech respondents). In the Czech Republic, however, second place is taken by the evaluation "weak" (6), while with the Slovak respondents it was "very good" (29.55%). Training in evaluation during the higher education studies is assessed in most cases as "average" (44.7%), in the Czech Republic again one level worse - as "weak" (7 respondents). Awareness about the work with pedagogical documentation was evaluated on both sides as the worst – "not sufficient" were stated by 43.94% of Slovak respondents and 10 Czech respondents. The same results were achieved as regards knowledge on how to solve stressful situations (43.18% of Slovaks and 10 Czechs). Similarly, training in the use of a textbook was almost consistently rated as "average" (40.91 Slovaks and 10 Czechs). Awareness about how to use information and communication technologies was again rated lower in the Czech Republic - as "weak" (8 Czech respondents). Only training with integrated pupils in the Czech Republic seems to be better carried out in the CR – the questionnaire results showed an evaluation of "average" (8 respondents) and "weak" (6) compared to Slovakia – "weak" (40.15%), "average" (37.88%).

During the first year of their school practice both Slovak and Czech novices have faced the least misunderstandings and problems with mentors and colleagues, and with establishing a relationship with the school management. What appears to be problematic is the area of work with pedagogical documentation, selection of appropriate teaching strategies, teaching methods and techniques. These results were also confirmed by follow-up interviews in which respondents noted: *"Despite the very friendly and generous environment that my new colleagues created for me, I had a constant feeling that there still is something I do not know ... am not aware of ... I am not sufficiently familiar with the school legislation ..."*.

No insistence in the area of perception of novices' needs was apparent in any of the options offered. All the needs suggested in the questionnaire were assessed as: "to some extent". If we order the suggested needs in this area, then the greatest emphasis was put on the emotional support of family members, friends and colleagues (which is identical to the abovementioned research results of Prokesova, 2000), handling administrative duties, the acquisition of educational communication, professional and methodological support and advice, and development of methodological skills. The least emphasis was put, on the contrary, on the improvement of communication and interpersonal skills. In the interviews with novices the topic "how to motivate students" occurs primarily and then "solutions for crisis/critical situations" occurs.

Respondents from both countries equally expect a professional approach of mentors towards them, above all, friendly and accommodative behaviour (89.39 % of Slovaks and 13 Czech respondents). Other very much appreciated qualities of mentors were a high level of expertise and professional experience (82.58% Slovak novices and 12 Czechs), a willingness to solve problems and time for discussions (69.7% and 12). At the opposite end, there was a willingness to provide supplementary teaching materials as inspiration for lesson planning (12.88% of Slovaks and 3 Czech respondents marked the answer "I do not expect"). From this question, it is clear that novices expect from their mentors helpful behaviour and positive personality traits more than inspiration in the form of material, concrete advice (which has been mentioned earlier, this follows from the previously address area - what they perceive as necessary). When introducing novices into real teaching, mentors consider "provision of professional support" (67.19%) their most important role. Interviews with mentors confirmed the importance of professional support: *"Pass on to novices the maximum of experience, subject knowledge and perceive and treat novices as equal to themselves, they are not scared to learn something from*

novices.” In the Czech Republic more emphasis was placed on provision of personal support, which can be attributed to the fact that teachers who have decided to become mentors have taken this decision mainly because of the personal support they wanted to provide to novices and this decision has been voluntary. Another very frequently stated role, regarded as important, is monitoring of the novice’s progress (identification of their strengths and weaknesses). It was identified as "very important" in 33.59% and as "important" in 64.06%. The same attitude was expressed towards such features as promotion and development of their self-reflection and counselling. Since the publication of the groundbreaking work of Kyriacou (1991) on key teachers’ competences, with the emphasis on the need for reflection and self-reflection as a tool for effective remediation in teaching, university staff and scientists, theoreticians and methodologists have dealt with this issue more closely. At the same time, however, it is possible to say that many teachers often lack this skill. Even a mentor, who should guide a novice to self-reflect, doesn’t have to have this skill fully developed. In this context the novices’ awareness of the need for support and development of self-reflection, expressed by more than 92% of respondents, is a significant fact. One third of mentors (31.25%) consider this role to be necessary and 60.94% of teachers to be important. To compare novices’ and mentors’ perception of induction, what novices expect from their mentors is shown in Table N°1. Perception of mentors’ roles while mentoring novices is presented in Table N° 2.

Table 1: Expectations of novices

I expect ...	mostly			to some extent			I do not expect		
	Slovakia		CR	Slovakia		CR	Slovakia		CR
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°
high level of professional expertise and experience	109	82,58	12	21	15,91	7	2	1,52	0
professional approach, friendly and generous behaviour	118	89,39	13	13	9,85	6	0	0	0
respect for my opinions, appreciation and support of my creativity and initiative	68	51,51	11	62	46,97	8	2	1,52	0
willingness to solve problems, allocate and have time for discussion	92	69,7	12	39	29,55	7	0	0	0
willingness to provide supplementary teaching materials as inspiration for lesson planning	42	31,82	7	73	55,3	9	17	12,88	3
positive evaluation of innovative methods and forms of work	56	42,42	5	71	53,79	13	5	3,79	1
counselling when solving problems connected with pupil assessment	71	53,79	9	56	42,42	10	5	3,79	0
counselling when solving	60	45,45	10	60	45,45	7	12	9,09	2

misunderstandings with pupils and their parents									
provision of information about school regime and rules	76	57,58	11	47	35,61	8	9	6,82	0
other	1								

Table 2: Tasks of mentors (results from Slovakia)

Tasks of mentors while mentoring novices	very important		important		less important		unnecessary	
	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%	N°	%
provision of professional support for novices	86	67,19	41	32,03	1	0,78	0	0
provision of personal support	55	42,97	64	50	9	7,03	0	0
monitoring of novices' progress (identification of their strengths and weaknesses)	43	33,59	82	64,06	3	2,34	0	0
assessment (continuous, stage, final)	38	29,69	74	57,81	16	12,5	0	0
mentor as a model for a novice	42	32,81	74	57,81	11	8,59	1	0,78
support and development of novices' self-reflection	40	31,25	78	60,94	9	7,03	1	0,78
mentor in the role of a critical friend (provision of constructive feedback for novices)	27	21,09	78	60,94	22	17,19	1	0,78
counselling (provision of guidelines and information for lesson planning, use of teaching aids, assessment of pupils etc.)	48	37,5	75	58,59	4	3,13	1	0,78
other	1		1					

Compared to Slovakia, in the Czech Republic the decision on nomination of mentors is in the hands of headmasters. The questionnaire survey and interviews with two novices who, although, they had their mentors, show that these mentors were not officially nominated for these novices, they "found each other", or their mentor was a family member who is also a teacher. In the Czech Republic the questionnaire in this area will be modified, supplemented by a question designed to find out who that mentor is, whether he was nominated, or whether they are willing colleagues, family members or someone else. If novices evaluate their relationship with mentors, they refer to it as "excellent" (44.67% of all the respondents), followed by "very good" (29.33% of all respondents). When assessing positive collaboration of novices with mentors, they could have indicated more options in Slovakia. The top positions achieved such qualities as constructive criticism (65.15%), followed by instructions

for assessment (63.63%) and lesson planning (62.12%). In the Czech Republic the most frequent response in this area was "instructions for assessment" (11), as well as instructions for lesson planning (10) and use of teaching aids (9). The most significant differences in collaboration of novices with mentors in both countries was observation of mentors at novices' lessons - in the Czech Republic a very frequent response was "within longer time intervals, randomly" (15), though "never" also appeared very often. In Slovakia observation was reported in 50% of cases as "regular and systemic". Regularity and system of work was most often referred to in Slovakia: professional (66.66%) and personal support (65.91%), and provision of feedback (63.63%) and frequency of contact (58.33%). The answers of mentors show a noticeable lack of mentors' interest in new and innovative methodological and didactic approaches in novices' lessons (37.88%). Mentors state that mainly in the areas of consultancy, provision of professional and personal support did they feel self-confident.

The induction period for novices in Slovakia is usually finalized in the form of observations carried out by school management (58.33%) or mentor (42.42%). Among the answers of Czech respondents terms like "silence along the path", "nothing" or "contract for next year" were often detected. The analysed data show that mentors are fully aware of their role. The opinions expressed in the semi-structured interviews can be summarized into three areas:

1. Communication between mentor and novice must be active, established on the basis of mutual trust, asking questions, creating partner relationship and learning from one another.
2. Mentors must provide their knowledge, experience and skills related to the organization of work, school documentation and creating school education plans, student assessment. Some respondents even suggest a specific procedure: *"In the ideal case the mentor will analyse with the novice each of his/her lesson plans, showing him/her how he would teach that lesson (even having the novice at the mentor's lesson), will provide or offer his lesson plans, will record the novice's lesson on video, and then will analyse it."*
3. There must be constant appeal to continuous personal and professional growth of teachers, while it is necessary to call for the renewal of the status of teachers, their social recognition and adequate financial remuneration.

As for the evaluation of the first year of teaching experience at schools novices feelings expressed in the semi-structured interviews varied from "exhausting, stressful, confusing" through "despite the mixed feelings also joyful", and "anticipation of stress and natural fears" up to "successful start." The areas they perceive as problematic are: "time consuming preparation for lessons, extensive documentation, managing of parental meetings, acceptance and integration into a new school, Roma pupils, teaching status and school facilities."

Conclusion

The results of the research show that the most important factor at the start of a teaching career for both groups of respondents are mainly relationships - relationships not only between the novice teacher and colleague-teachers at school but also between the novice and mentor. A novice enters school practice in majority cases with enthusiasm, expectations, willingness to work, but of course, also with some fears and hesitation, and therefore it is very important to avoid disappointment at the beginning of their careers, so that they do not have to face the "shock of reality." Mentoring is undoubtedly a very important element at the start of the teaching career of novices. We consider it a very positive fact that the role of mentors in Slovakia has some legislative basis in comparison with the situation in the Czech Republic. The current research data show that the role of mentor is perceived as very important. The interviews show that if a headmaster or someone from the school management does not nominate a mentor, novices try to establish a closer relationship with some of their colleagues who fit this role, are willing to help and give advice. Bearing in mind that in the Czech Republic only a small pilot of this research has been carried out, it will be interesting to compare whether the data obtained in the pilot will confirm what has been established so far or whether other respondents will respond differently. As recognized from the research in Slovakia, Slovak mentors are fully aware of their role and show an effort to meet the expectations of their younger colleagues - novices. They can formulate their duties, they are aware of their responsibilities, and

know the strengths and weaknesses of carrying out their tasks and roles. Many sense the importance of their role; they feel their work brings them pleasure and a feeling of reward. However, they rely mostly on their own knowledge, experience and strengths but lack meaningful and focused guidance. Last but not least, they are not adequately paid, which can act as a de-motivating factor. Mentors therefore call for support from school managers and for systematic, purposeful training.

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Vyhlášky ministerstva školství České socialistické republiky č. 79 ze dne 26. října 1977 o jednotném systému dalšího vzdělávání učitelů škol poskytujících základní, střední a vyšší vzdělání a ostatních pedagogických a výchovných pracovníků

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